

It is hard to say which affects the emotions more, exposure to poetry in New Jersey, or exposure to ranching in the shortgrass country. Both the craft and the business disturb man – disturb his equilibrium – make him seek rhythm in words and seek profits in vain.

The case in point arose after the poetry festival in Waterloo, while traveling south into Pennsylvania. We passed a small flock of blackface Suffolk sheep – 12 or 14 head by a roadside. In seconds, a body twitch hit severe enough to twist my seat belt and flash the “no seat belt” warning on the dashboard.

Fifteen years ago to the day, the ranch turned 12 Suffolk bucks out to breed 300 ewes. In a week, two rams ran with two ewes each; 10 head of the black phonies stood at the closest gate to the ranch house, bleating to be back at the barn. Herders fashion wild dreams, but not to the extent of expecting miraculous conception.

Our plan pointed for the Amish country in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We booked rooms away from the towns on purpose. After four days of swarms of people at the festival, we craved a grass turf instead of asphalt pad.

The inn set deep in dense woods fit the bill. Distance drowned the road noises. All other rooms stood vacant. Two

cats sleeping on the balcony offered little intrusion to privacy. Caretakers weary from a weekend wedding celebration caused less than the cats.

We spent the afternoon reading. Pages turning make the slightest sound, yet turning a page corner down may resound if fumbled. She made notes, but used soft lead pencils. I am the loquacious one, but the aura overruled that fault.

The reception room ran heavily to imported expensive teas for sale. The ordinary domestic tea bags in the room gave a clue of a tightly managed operation. Bartlett pears on the buffet came from an orchard off the parking lot, the biscotti in a jar from someone's kitchen – not a grocery store.

Next morning, we drove to the city of Lancaster. The principal focus downtown centered on a block-square public market. Volume ran heavy to the bins of garden-grown vegetables rich in the strength of the earth: bulbs, heads, bunches and strings of luscious produce dug or picked before the morning light.

Amish people ran most of the stalls, the men heavy-bearded and dressed in black suits; the women's hair pulled into tight buns over plain cotton dresses of extra skirt length. No young people worked in the stalls.

Kids go to church school until the eighth grade, the level required by the state for a work permit. Young ones, we were told, drove cars until reaching the adult age for baptism.

The buggies and horses must have been parked away from the market. Scooters, we learned, are not sinful. The faithful reason that one can't stray far from home on a scooter. We later saw a guy in grim clothes using his right hind leg to push a scooter at a fast pace. No way to guess how far home was, but a safe bet says he hit there before dark.

The tilling of the farmlands by mule-power is a standard of the faith. If my early experience helping bale hay on Spring Creek and hauling feed on the Divide with mules counts, the phrase "tests the faith" fits, too.

It wasn't until we passed a line of nine stout, 16-hand dun mules facing the road as if trained to do so that other thoughts began to connect. The Big Boss and his brother, Uncle Goat Whiskers, used mules to pull wagons to mark lambs and feed cattle after ranchers out west flew Piper Cubs to roundup deep canyons and herders to the east drove jeeps to reach rough country. Be aware that neither of the two brothers professed a religion. Do you suppose

they were Amish or had Amish learnings without ever coming into the open?

One other small fact: the tall, high-withered horses looked Thoroughbred, stepping off in long, fast strides on the right of way, pulling the buggies down the road. The case strengthens by the additional fact that the Amish in Indiana buy retired racehorses to pull the buggies.

Then fit these small tidbits together, how the Big Boss worshipped every long-headed, thin-hoofed, black-maned Thoroughbred sapsucker he saw, and he sure got around lots of horse operations. And add next to the evidence that Uncle Goat Whiskers wore black, high-top boots under a somber gray suit backed by a black, single-string tie in a costume that'd make the Amish dub him a conservative.

The notion became so exciting that my pal took over the wheel. We passed two buggies harnessed to long-bodied black horses. The Boss came back big as life. He'd pulled off the road to strike a trade, or strike a story.